

It always took me a day and night to adjust my vision from warmly glorious Californian Technicolor, to monochrome, dark and drippy November in Cheshire [after I returned from my annual pre-Christmas week with my father].

Still, the thought that Christmas was on the horizon was very consoling because soon Henry and I would be off to provide seasonal cooking, comfort and cheer to one of our regular clients, and too busy working to even notice what the weather outside was doing.

Henry was both my business partner and my best friend - or one of them, since I also had Charlotte, even if I only now saw her very infrequently.

Henry and I, on the other hand, couldn't *miss* seeing each other, since we occupied twin lodges on either side of the gated drive to Cranberry Chase, a bijou Queen Anne des. res. that belonged to a distant relative of his. His family were cash-strapped, but had a wealth of rich and posh connections. [...]

Henry had filled my fridge with fresh food and drink before my return, but then left me alone to recover. But as usual, by next morning I was more or less back in my right mind and ready for action.

This was just as well, because as I was finishing my second round of buttered toast and Marmite, he sent me a text:

Disaster, darling! Come quickly - I'll put the coffee on!

I wasn't unduly worried by this, because he's such a drama queen - it's his way of making life exciting and squeezing the last drop of enjoyment out of everything.

We run our business, Heavenly Houseparties, from the huge kitchen extension at the back of his lodge, where there's plenty of room to spread out the paperwork on the pine table and stick up the charts of our bookings - *and* our projected absences, during which we both had other fish to fry - so I texted back that I was on my way and headed over.

Henry kissed me on both cheeks rather distractedly and exclaimed, in a voice of sepulchral doom: 'You have come!'

Then he led the way into the kitchen, where he handed me a large mug of coffee.

'Though given the bad news, it ought to be a stiff gin and tonic!' he said, in more natural tones, but since he wasn't looking desperately worried, I assumed the problem wasn't life or death. Henry had curling, rose-gold hair, pink cheeks and round, bright blue eyes, so he looked like a Botticelli cherub with attitude . . . until you notice the short, square, muscular, rugby-playing physique. His curls were currently dishevelled from having agitated fingers raked through them, but he stopped now after suddenly catching sight of himself in the mirror and asked if I thought it was a good look.

'No, people will simply think you've forgotten to brush your hair,' I said, taking a gulp of good coffee. 'And I couldn't have drunk alcohol anyway, because I'll have to drive over to Granny's house in a bit, to make sure Mrs Frant has watered the succulents this week. It's a pity Granny couldn't take them on the cruise with her, because she does fret about them.'

Henry abandoned the mirror and plumped down opposite me. 'Don't you want to know what the bad news is?'

'You haven't had a single date from that upmarket dating site you paid so much money to join, while I've been away?' I guessed.

'No, it isn't that . . . though actually, I haven't had a single bite yet, you're quite right,' he said. 'But this is *business* bad: Lady B has done a Grinch and cancelled Christmas!'

'What, Lady Bugle has cancelled her booking?' I exclaimed, astounded, because we'd catered for her Christmas house parties for four years running.

'Tootled her tin trumpet and toddled off,' agreed Henry. 'I thought she was as good as money in the bank.'

You certainly *needed* a lot of money to afford the services of Heavenly Houseparties - 'complete, carefree house party catering: from a weekend to a month' - and especially the Christmas bookings, which came at a premium.

'Why?' I demanded. 'I mean, it's nearly the end of November, a bit late in the day for her to cancel, or for *us* to find another gig.' 'Family illness, apparently. You can't really argue with that, and she said she wasn't expecting her deposit back.'

I sighed. 'It must be serious then, because even though she's *loaded*, she always expects her money's worth out of us, and more, doesn't she?'

We did work very hard for our money, though: we cooked, served, tidied, made beds and generally took the stress out of house parties (Henry even did a very grand butler, if the host was out to impress), but it's surprising how many of our clients seemed to expect us to do all the cleaning and provide twenty-four-hour room service, too.

'She only told me yesterday, so I suppose I'd better change our availability on the website,' Henry said. 'I could try contacting people who enquired about a Christmas booking and were turned away, I suppose. There was that woman quite recently who was very pressing and didn't want to take No for an answer.'

'They've probably all made alternative arrangements by now,' I said rather gloomily. Our Christmas booking is so lucrative we don't have to take another one till Easter.

'It gets even worse, Dido,' Henry said. 'If I'm not away working, Mummy will force me to join the annual family gathering instead, and apart from feeling I'd rather be shut into a small walled town rife with Bubonic plague, I simply can't afford all those presents.'

'I suppose that's the drawback with having so many richer relatives,' I said, and of course, *we'd* be much richer if we worked for most of the year, and not just a few selected weeks of it. But we preferred to earn just enough to keep us during our precious time off, when Henry worked on his increasingly popular blog and I wrote my recipe and reminiscence books.

It was a way of life that had worked well for us both for ten years now.

'Well, Granny Celia and Dora will still be away and I've just seen Dad, so if we don't get a booking I won't have anywhere else to go.'

'You could come to the gathering of the clan with me,' suggested Henry.

I shuddered, remembering the year I'd tried that, before the business took off. 'No, thank you. I'm still traumatized by the experience of dancing the Gay Gordons with your cousin Hector.'

'He's very *hearty*,' he agreed, which was one way of putting it.

'We could simply both stay at home over Christmas and pretend we're away,' I pointed out, and he brightened slightly. 'Of course, Mummy would find out eventually, but by then it would be too late. We could overindulge in the eating and drinking, play Scrabble and watch old films back-to-back.'

If those are the Interests he's listed on that dating site, it wasn't really surprising he hadn't had any takers . . . though it sounded fun to me.

'There we are then, we have a contingency plan if we don't get a last-minute booking,' I said. 'We could make up some of the shortfall by taking a spring half-term post, as well as our usual Easter booking next year.'

I got up and stretched - economy aeroplane seats are cramped and not designed for any known human form, especially one six foot tall in her bare flippers, and my spine was still kinked into knots.

'I'd better leave you to it, Henry, and get over to Great Mumming to make sure Granny's succulents still *are* succulent. I'll see you later.'

I grew up in Great Mumming, a pleasant small market town in West Lancashire, set where the fertile farmlands start to rise towards the moors. Granny's cottage was right on the edge of it and built from mellow old bricks. The central part dated back to the early 1800s, though it had seen a lot of changes since then.

When Granny and her husband, Paul, had bought it, soon after their marriage, it had been in need of total renovation and they'd worked hard to turn it into a happy family home, completed by the adoption of my father.

I'm very sure that Granny hadn't been expecting to have to start all over again with a newborn - me - when she was widowed and in her late fifties. It was lucky that she and her best friend, Dora, also a widow, had by then decided to pool their resources and share the cottage - and, as it turned out, the childcare. [...]

Once Dora, who was younger than Granny, had retired from teaching, they could indulge their shared passion for travelling outside the school holidays, so nowadays they seemed to be away more often than they were at home. Luckily they were both well enough off to globetrot - or globecruise - to their hearts' content. [...]

Everything in the cottage was dusted and polished immaculately, the air smelling of lavender, beeswax and, indefinably, *home*: I might always have felt like a giant and inconvenient cuckoo in the nest, but there had been a place for me there. [...]

My phone burst into that mad xylophone thing that I'm always meaning to change. It was Henry.

'You'll never believe this, Dido, but not ten minutes after I changed our Christmas availability on the website, we had a new booking. Haven't you always *yearned* to spend December in a castle in Northumberland?'

'Frankly, *no*. It's bleak as hell up there in winter,' I told him, shivering, but he was too jubilant to listen.

'Come home, darling, all is forgiven!' he said, then rang off.